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Of Industry and Imagination

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In the second half of the 18th century when the process of the industrialisation of the countryside only started to gain momentum, industry, of which the railway was later to become such a powerful symbol, was not regarded as being entirely at variance with the landscape. Rather, it was treated as one of many practices of taming or disciplining nature, diverse operations of improvement in the course of which nature could receive a new aesthetic aspect or become turned to account through the exploitation of its resources. In the words of Barrie Trinder, rationality and order were brought to a landscape that was unkempt or to one which was wild.¹ As in the 18th-century Britain was being discovered by native travellers who toured their country in search of visually gratifying scenery which would exemplify the then fashionable aesthetic categories of the beautiful, picturesque or sublime. The desire for the sublime would be principally satisfied by nature spots – be it mountains, waterfalls, or precipices – but also novel sites of industrial production: quarries, coal-pits and above all furnaces, in which polite observers would be keen to see contemporary equivalents of, for instance, Vulcan's cavern in Etna where the Cyclops hammer out the thunder, the description of which scene Edmund Burke considered perhaps one of the most sublime passages in the whole of the *Eneid*.² The viewing of

¹ Cf. B. Trinder: *The Making of the Industrial Landscape*. London: Phoenix Giant, 1982, p. 102.

² E. Burke: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1937, p. 135.

industrial sites offered manifold possibilities of engrafting onto mills, mines, and forges such qualities as darkness, terror, might, energy, the aspects that evoke the sublime. Francis D. Klingender gives this overview of the new topography in which industry became a dramatic landscape feature:

Coal-pits find themselves sited on remote, desolate heaths. Quarries lie cavernous in the mountains. Mills are perched precariously on the steep banks of tumbling streams. Ironworks are silhouetted against the flare the molten metal casts on the night sky. These things sometimes evoke a menacing sense of power run to seed or out of control. They take on a cyclopean air.³

The place which, next to the Lake District, became a must in the itinerary of many enthusiasts of the sublime was Coalbrookdale, a valley in Shropshire which in the course of the 18th century evolved into a fully-fledged industrial enterprise to later merit the name of the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. It was possibly one of the first industrial locations that attracted not only professional manufacturers, but also a host of lay persons who saw in it an impressive specimen of the relation between nature and industry, the lovely and the dreadful, or were attracted by the sheer spectacular quality of the tensions informing the place. It certainly was worth a tourist's gaze.

Visits to industrial regions were a late addition to the fashion for landscape viewing, and proprietors as well as ironmasters, aware of the spectacular value of ironworks, encouraged and facilitated observation: "Ironmasters organised Coalbrookdale as a spectacle, with scenic walks, vantage points, and times when the tapping of furnaces and casting could be seen. [...] Those with a taste for the horrible could be winched down mineshafts, taken into tar-tunnels, or ride, helter-skelter, down inclined planes."⁴ To the popularity of the new tourism responded local innkeepers

³ F.D. Klingender: *Art and the Industrial Revolution*. London: Evelyn, Adams & MacKay, 1968, p. 85.

⁴ S. Daniels: "Louthembourg's Chemical Theatre: 'Coalbrooke by Night.'" In: *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art 1700–1850*. Ed. J. Barrell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 204.

offering their services to the “families that wish to stop and see the manufactories in Coalbrookdale.”⁵ The demands of landscape viewing required the observers should celebrate their response to the scenery, be it in a visual⁶ or written form, and Coalbrookdale in particular engendered a plethora of descriptions seeking to enclose it within some aesthetic formula. For most the formula was supplied by the culture of antiquity: it stirred the imagination of the observers who likened the sight of working furnaces and forges to “the Regions of Pluto” or “the workshop of Vulcan.”⁷

⁵ Quoted in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, p. 89. Trinder does not provide the source of this quotation.

⁶ The most impressive pictorial portrayal of Coalbrookdale – and, as some would argue, of the Industrial Revolution – was created by Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg in *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801). Presenting industrial production against the nocturnal background de Loutherbourg, the artist specialising in spectacular scenes and themes, captured its dynamic theatricality: fire and smoke, hectic motion and noise. Earlier and more subtle images of the site were executed by François Vivare, George Robertson (*Prospect of Coalbrookdale*, 1758), JMW Turner (*Limekiln at Coalbrookdale*, 1798) or even Loutherbourg himself (*Iron works, Coalbrookdale, Shropshire*). Particularly remarkable are William Williams twin paintings *Morning View of Coalbrookdale* and *Afternoon View of Coalbrookdale* (1777), which seem to follow the English landscape tradition. They show a view on the valley surrounded by wooded hills emphasising the soft, undulating, picturesque irregularity of the scenery: the winding river, green eminences, fields, meadow, and groves. But the hollow of the valley contains no pretty hamlet but a sinister complex: furnaces and forges, flames and smoke, and from the smokestack there belches into the afternoon sky a dark noxious column obscuring some of the scene. In their composition the pictures capitalise on the juxtaposition of the natural or agrarian surroundings with the single spot of industrial activity. Williams’s industrial scenes do not however possess the volcanic energy emanating from Loutherbourg’s nocturnal picture, not only on account of his situating it in the relative distance. In the *Afternoon View* the landscape is enriched by the presence of an elegant company, standing by the copse, just above the industrial hollow. However dramatic, the scene below does not absorb their attention, they do not even look down, engaged in their own affairs. They may well be travellers come to visit the area for their fill of the industrial sublime, but having seen what there was to see they will soon pass on to other sights listed in their fashionable itinerary.

⁷ A number of the accounts in which such analogies are tendered can be found in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, pp. 89–90 and S. Daniels: “Loutherbourg’s Chemical Theatre...”, pp. 212–214.

Still, probably the most illustrious, or the most seminal, comment comes from Arthur Young, agriculturalist and traveller. Young does not delve into the classical past but avails himself of a more up-to-date framework provided by 18th-century aesthetic nomenclature, and on first calling the place “a very romantic spot” he immediately remarks that it is, however, “too beautiful to be much in unison with that variety of horrors art has spread at the bottom; the noise of the forges, mills, &c., with all their vast machinery, the flames bursting from the furnaces with the burning of the coal and the smoke of the lime kilns, are altogether sublime, and would unite well with craggy and bare rocks [...]”⁸ Even though Young does not hesitate to speak of industrial busy-ness that spreads before his eyes as of horrors, he appreciates the grandeur of the scenery; the tension between art and nature produces an awesome and entrancing spectacle of energy, which affords the viewer a very powerful aesthetic experience. What first captures Young’s admiration is the energy of nature visible in the luxuriant growth and he describes the spot as “a winding glen between two immense hills which break into various forms, and all thickly covered with wood, forming the most beautiful sheets of hanging wood.”⁹

In the eyes of the spectator the scene is impressive principally on account of the contrast between the beauty of nature and the horror of art. Young’s description of the view suggests that he watches manifestations of different energies, natural and industrial ones, which seem to be competing with each other as each of them is flaunting its force through indefatigable productivity intimated, in turn, by a variety of forms. Like so many other 18th-century observers, he cannot resist the correcting impulse and so “craggy and bare rocks” are believed to provide a more appropriate backdrop for the ironworks than wooded slopes, yet it is precisely in the incongruity between the gentle, green roundedness of the hills and the blast furnaces blazing in the hollow that the staggering scenic effects resided.

⁸ A. Young: *Annals of Agriculture*. Vol. 4. In: H. Jennings: *Pandæmonium 1660–1886. The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*. London: Papermac, 1995, p. 79.

⁹ A. Young: *Annals...*

Certainly, so must have thought a French traveller who made a walking tour of the industrial landscape of Pontcysyllte in Wales:

After a long and exhausting walk, I came into the valley on a fine autumn evening, just as the sun was setting. Never had I seen such an imposing sight. In the midst of the luxuriant woodlands, still flourishing with all their natural freshness, arose whirlwinds of flame and smoke, continual eruptions from the craters of industry. There were blast furnaces, forges, limekilns, piles of coal being coked, workshops, fine mansions, villages built in an amphitheatre around the flanks of the valley.¹⁰

What turns the landscape into a breathtaking spectacle (and the sunset at which it is viewed makes it even more dazzling a scene) is, like in Coalbrookdale, the juxtaposition of the fertile energies of nature visible in abundant vegetation and more violent forces of industry. Watching the clash of the energies, the observer seems almost baffled by nature's tranquil resistance to the baneful influence of industrial activities as the woods which envelop the works are "still flourishing" retaining their unspoiled condition. Yet central to the description, and central to the landscape itself, are "the craters of industry" from which erupt smoke and flame. Indeed, the amphitheatrical composition of the landscape with the forges and furnaces situated at the bottom of the valley enclosed by hillsides puts one in mind of an inverted volcano containing a tremendous, concentrated force. The powerful as much as effective analogy between the volcanic and industrial energy was already made in the paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby whose industrial scenes, such as *Arkwright's Mill by Moonlight*, are, as David Fraser ingeniously observes,¹¹ reminiscent of his earlier studies of Vesuvius in which he expressed his preoccupation with the dynamic, possibly destructive forces of nature, light effects, and landscape transformation.

¹⁰ Quoted in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, p. 92. No source is provided.

¹¹ Cf. D. Fraser: "'Fields of Radiance': the Scientific and Industrial Scenes of Joseph Wright." In: *The Iconography of Landscape. Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*. Eds. D. Cosgrove, S. Daniels. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 136.

It is a similar kind of fascination that resounds in the French traveller's attitude to the viewed scenery, which he describes with a certain dose of enthusiasm characteristic of a tourist impressed with a rare sight, but his admiration for the so very obviously industrial landscape is, in fact, far from impartial. He is not indifferent to the beauty of the woods or the sunset, but they do not constitute an autonomous object of his aesthetic appreciation as if they could hardly be impressive in their own right. Rather, their value lies in their providing a suitable background and therefore they matter insofar as they help to better set off the more exquisite spectacle of industrial power. What impinges on this undeniable partiality for industry is the observer's profession as his delight turns out to be the delight of an engineer who looks at the scene with pride and sees in the transformed landscape the evidence of the power of technology as well as some indication of his own mastery. Yet it is not only engineers that found such views dazzling; as it has been evidenced earlier by the end of the 18th century the industrial landscape received recognition from the polite and cultivated travellers prizing it an object of aesthetic contemplation. To some the attractiveness of such sites inhered perhaps in the busy-ness this landscape was permeated with: "there is always something interesting in the busy bustle of industry,"¹² wrote Richard Ayton.

However, from the rational response in which curiosity dominates it is necessary to distinguish that in which blend aesthetic, intellectual and emotional factors. Such a reaction was more commonly evinced by those with no overt engineerly bias, for them industrial scenery was visually and mentally impressive. While the natural surroundings in which an industrial site was enclosed dramatically set it off, and thus amplified the overall effect, even in its own right it offered enough, presenting itself to the beholder as "an astonishing maze of machinery and motion."¹³ The astonishment felt at the sight has its origin in distance, physical as much as emotional or intellectual one. True, the attitude of amazement is by no means strange to the engi-

¹² R. Ayton: *A Voyage Round Great Britain Undertaken in the Summer of 1813*. Quoted in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, p. 101.

¹³ W. White: *A Londoner's Walk to Land's End*. London 1855. Quoted in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, p. 223.

neer, and it perhaps attains the greatest intensity when the spectator contemplates the sight from some vantage point which permits a comprehensive and impressive view, but his is a knowing amazement entrenched in practical familiarity with what he observes. Thus in his case astonishment does not have the intricacy of that of the non-professional. The latter's astonishment at the contemplated sight incorporates awe, yet it is an awe of the superior kind, namely such in which a relative ignorance of technological proceedings does not degenerate into naivety. In this instance the appreciation of the sight mainly stems from the viewer's expertise in the sphere of visual contemplation, expertise assisted by the knowledge of requisite aesthetic theories.

Just as in making the most of the beautiful landscape the cultured observer drew on some theoretical experience, so in studying industrial scenery he would avail himself of relevant knowledge in order to put an aesthetic edge on his response. The awe-based astonishment pervading his reaction was akin to that which possesses the soul, as Burke would have it, in the experience of the sublime. Thus aestheticised, technology brooked no overt hatred. But aestheticisation could happen, in the first place, because for the viewer the industrial spectacle had the value of a rarity: although currently an item on the fashionable itinerary, it was located more or less off the beaten track, and therefore did not constitute a permanent element of his immediate visual environment. As a visiting spectator one could come to marvel at and speculate on the unusualness of the scenery before one's eyes, but from this scenery one would go away, perhaps horrified but interestingly rather than disturbingly so. It is only when the industrial landscape tourist considers a possibility of staying "all the night" in the immediate vicinity of the Coalbrookdale ironworks that industry becomes stripped of its spectacular aura and represented in its less glamorous, not to say noisome practice. Tartarean metaphors and analogies only so recently indulged in founder under the weight of suddenly tangible realities. The spectator has to dispense with the associational play and move to the sphere of solid denotations in which fire and smoke emitted by the forges and furnaces signify simply unbearable heat and "intolerable [sulphur] stench." Uncomfortable as such an awareness may be, it does not have to contaminate the previously conceived sublime interpretation, the latter one can salvage by making a timely re-

treat. "We were glad enough to get away and sleep at Shifnal,"¹⁴ Charles Dibdin reports the conclusion of his adventure with Coalbrookdale.

The attitude to Coalbrookdale is emblematic of the late 18th-century response to the growing conspicuity of industry and technology within the English landscape. Early on this response accommodated the tone of admiration towards the machine itself, which so visibly validated the powers of the human mind, as well as towards the landscape now rendered visually attractive in a novel manner. A somewhat different, more complex and more ambiguous, view of the industrialised landscape can be found in "Colebrooke Dale" (1785), a poem by Anna Seward, who contemplated the transformed valley in consternation, akin to that later expressed in different circumstances by William Wordsworth or John Ruskin when they were confronted with the prospect or fact of the railway, regarding the new iron-works as a fatal presence blighting natural surroundings. But for her, just like for Ruskin a century later, the thus altered scenery bears on poetry, and so the underlying theme of her piece is the relationship between industry, nature and art.

Showing the juxtaposition of industry and nature, Seward precisely delineates the visual or aural effects of what she terms point-blank a violation of "the soft, romantic, consecrated scenes,"¹⁵ theretofore the haunt of airy nymphs:

Now we view
 Their fresh, their fragrant, and their silent reign
 Usurpt by Cyclops; – hear, in mingled tones,
 Shout their throng'd Barge, their pond'rous Engine clang
 Thro' thy coy Dells; while red the numerous Fires,
 With umber'd flames, bicker on all thy Hills,

¹⁴ Ch. Dibdin: *Observations on a Tour through Almost the Whole of England and a Considerable Part of Scotland (1801–1802)*. Quoted in B. Trinder: *The Making...*, p. 90.

¹⁵ A. Seward: "Colebrooke Dale." 1791 version. In: *Eighteenth-Century Poetry. An Annotated Anthology*. Eds. D. Fairer, Ch. Gerrard. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, l. 9. All the subsequent quotations from the poem, unless indicated otherwise, are made to this edition and will be marked by the number of the line.

Dark'ning the Summer's Sun with columns huge
 Of thick, sulphureous smoke, which spread, like palls,
 That screen the Dead, upon the sylvan robes
 Of thy aspiring Rocks; pollute thy Gales,
 And stain thy glassy waters.

ll. 21–31

Although she does not abstain from a mythological metaphor, she promptly overcomes the temptation to derealise the scene of destruction and settles on verbs and adjectives that disambiguate the description and remove the danger of some incidental conferring upon the industrialised landscape an aura of attractiveness. Mythological imagery, though touched upon, does not enjoy elaboration and so the workers busying themselves among the forges and furnaces are only briefly glimpsed as the Cyclops, Hephaestus's assistants. First and foremost, those who ousted the ethereal nymphs are, Seward insists, flesh-and-blood men, rude strength incarnate, "with shoulders bent, and broad, / Keen eye and cheek fuliginous" (ll. 7–8). From these athletic and daring figures of "dusk Artificers, with brazen throats" (l. 32) she, evidently, withholds any heroic quality, preferring instead to see their robustness as a stamp of vulgarity. Vulgarity remains at odds with beauty, and likewise with poetry, not only because the vulgar in itself cannot be beautiful or poetical but also because it means ignorance of or insensitivity to these spheres. While the workmen invade the valley with "keen eye," it is keenness akin to voracity or even savagery rather than to fine, imaginative discernment. The romantic substance of the dale does not reveal itself to common perception, the nymphs who "in Times long vanish'd" (l. 11) would range the groves were a sight only too readily available to the privileged few who could conjure up the invisible: "What tho' to *vulgar* eyes / Invisible, yet oft the piercing gaze / Of the rapt Bard in every opening Glade / Beheld them wander" (ll. 14–17). The invasion of the industrial "Tribes" (l. 7) into Coalbrookdale irretrievably cleanses the place off its illusory nymphs, that is to say it cleanses off them the Poet's vision to practise and thus incapacitates the imagination. The transformed valley makes it impossible to experience what Peter de Bolla terms "fantasy encounters with the landscape," apparently visual encounters in which, how-

ever, the real of the place attracts little notice of the viewer.¹⁶ The real is suppressed and superimposed by an imaginary landscape of the spectator's own invention.

Sites of labour constitute "unpoetic scenes"¹⁷: among "pond'rous Engine[s]" (l. 24), "sulphurous smoke" (l. 28), "rattling Forges [...] and [...]" "hammers' din" (l. 103) elusive beauty cannot be envisaged and hence poetry cannot come into being, complains Seward in the midst of her poem on the industrial locations. Nor can poetry grow in the countryside that is naturally, in the sense of originally, barren or desolate like the heath in the vicinity of "grim Wolverhampton" (l. 86) or the moor near "smoke-involv'd" (l. 87) Sheffield. Thus while Seward has no sympathy for the industrial towns themselves, she does not grieve over their natural neighbourhood either since, always lacking in beauty, it is equally unpoetic, and since an unlikely habitat of Woodnymphs or Naiads "there no Poet stray'd to catch bright inspirations" (ll. 96–97). Coalbrookdale's claim to lamentation is justified for it possesses a beautiful and, by the same token, poetic past, the past embodied by "grassy Lanes, [...] wood-wild Glens, / Knoles precipitant, [...] Rocks, and Streams" (ll. 5–6) as well as the verse they in turn inspired. Therefore on being discovered, appropriated and sullied by industrial production the place cannot but lose touch with poetry.

But as Seward's piece illustrates it, perhaps inadvertently so, it is not an absolute rupture and changed as it is, Coalbrookdale has not lost its potential to excite the imagination. Rather, the transformed scenery necessitates the transformation of poetry since it brings about the waning of the pastoral convention, which she herself could not help getting entangled into when recollecting the once "sylvan Colebrooke's winding vales," (l. 81) predictably enough, the dwelling place of "Dryads" (l. 104) or "pearly-wristed Naiads" (l. 12).

Consequently, she brings the poem to a woeful conclusion blaming industry with its coarse, ugly music for scaring away the nymphs placed there by force of the poetic vision; in other words, the noise of the industrial activ-

¹⁶ P. de Bolla: "The charm'd eye." In: *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century*. Eds. V. Kelly, D.E. von Mücke. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 104.

¹⁷ The phrase was used in the 1810 version of the poem.

ity breaks “the raptur’d Poet’s spell” (l. 105). Nonetheless, this disenchantment does not ostracise poetry, the nymphs might be frightened off, but the poet, however reluctantly or temporarily, remains on the scene, even if only to expose the circumstances of the change responsible for her frustration. And it may well be that for poetry the change is propitious in that it dislodges the poet less from Coalbrookdale and more from the hollow of the idyllic convention. Industry which “to a gloomy Erebus transform[ed] / The destined rival of Tempean Vales” (ll. 106–107) roused poetry from a state of certain self-complacency, or even tedium, which made it stick to threadbare imagery. But this Seward seems curiously reluctant to admit as she somehow sulkily claims the impossibility of the poetic composition, even though she has created a poem inspired by the ugly invasion of industry into natural surroundings, the poem whose most compelling passages are not these recreating the lost charm of “Colebrook’s Muse-devoted Vales” (l. 47) but those in which she actually looks at the industrial locations proper:

Grim Wolverhampton kindles smouldering fires,
 And Sheffield smoke involv’d! – dim where she stands,
 Circled by lofty Mountains, that condense
 Her dark, and spiral wreaths to drizzling rains,
 Frequent, and sullied; as the neighbouring Wilds
 Ope their swart veins, and feed her cavern’d flames;
 While to her dusky Sister sullen yields
 Long desolated Ketley’s livid breast
 The ponderous metal.

ll. 86–94

But these never being “Muse-devoted” places, never claimed by “aerial Forms [that] / *There* wove the floral crown, or smiling stretch’d / The shelly sceptre” (ll. 94–96) and so never contemplated by the poet can, contrary to Seward’s conviction, produce not only “the ponderous metal” but also imaginative poetry, unencumbered by stock associations and established poetics. Industry can make poetry after all.